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GENIUS IN CHILDREN.

BY ANDREW LANG.

DR. JOHNSON defined genius as "an infinite capacity for taking pains." He remarked, "I am persuaded that had Sir Isaac Newton applied himself to poetry he would have made a very fine epic poem." In short, the Doctor's opinion was that a man, by accident, is born with more mind, with a more powerful mind, than other people, and that the *direction* of this power, to poetry, war, law, mathematics, politics, is quite an affair of chance. But the power must be "applied with diligence."

Now, in my opinion, Dr. Johnson was wrong, and I would rather define Genius as "an unmeasured capacity for doing things, *without* taking pains." Moreover, I fancy that, as a rule, the child of genius is born to do but one set of things in this excellent easy way, though there are exceptions, as in Napoleon's case.

Let us take arithmetic, the science of numbers. Dr. Johnson said, "We may instance the science of numbers, which all minds are equally capable of attaining" . . . "Mathematics are a science to which the meanest intellects are equal." . . . "Yet we find a prodigious difference in the powers of different men, in that respect, after they are grown up, because their minds have been more or less exercised in it."

Now, surely both schoolboys and teachers will here disagree with the Doctor. In the power of learning arithmetic there are prodigious, natural differences from the very first. I, myself—this does not illustrate genius!—could not be taught arithmetic at all beyond the simplest rules, and algebra not at all. As to mathematics, Macaulay was absolutely incapable of learning them; so too, I think, was Sir William Hamilton, the philosopher. Meanwhile, many boys, otherwise stupid, are fair, or even good, mathematicians.

But the great argument against the Doctor is furnished by calculating boys. About a score of these prodigies are known in history. At a very early age, say, five or six, they have been able to do in a moment, and correctly, calculations which, with pencil and paper, would occupy mathematicians for a long time. A German schoolmaster once set his class a sum which he expected would suffice for an hour's work. One boy scrawled a line of figures on his slate and threw it down. "There it lies," said he, and his answer was right. Where was the taking of infinite pains?

In this case genius was a capacity for doing things without taking pains at all. As a rule, these calculators have been unable to explain how they did the sums. The answers flashed on them; they *saw* the answers at a glance; they did not know *how*.

Out of about a score of such boys two or three have been almost idiots at everything but calculation. This, of course, again proves the doctor to be wrong! These boys had *not* large quantities of mind in general, of mind fit for all purposes; they only had arithmetical genius, without taking pains.

Two or three of these lads again turned out great philosophers, or great practical men. The rest were on the common level. The strangest was Archbishop Whateley. As a small boy he was a miracle at counting. At about twelve years of age he lost the knack, and, though a very clever man, became almost a dunce in arithmetic; certainly, at least, no better than his neighbors.

Thus Dr. Johnson's chosen exemple, of genius as applied to numbers, is found to confute his opinion. If any reader of this happens to be, or to know, a calculating miracle of a child, may I implore him to study the case, and especially to observe whether the child is left-handed, or can make equally good use of both hands?

The most extraordinary genius would be that which could do anything equally well without taking pains. Of this class the standing example is Joan of Arc. A peasant girl of seventeen, she understood the politics of her day as nobody else understood them. In war, whether for gallantry and resolution as a leader, for skill in artillery practice, for science in military combinations, or for Napoleon-like suddenness in surprises, she excelled all captains of her time. She was an accomplished rider, who

had never learned to ride. When questioned by theologians, she answered with such mastery that they were intellectually powerless in her presence.

Yet she was an untaught peasant child, who could not read nor write. Here, then, was genius, but the only pains she took were pains to make other people carry out her ideas.

In this instance genius conspicuously borders on the miraculous. Indeed, genius always does border on the miraculous. It is intellect and power so different in degree from that of other people that it seems to differ in kind, and to be a sort of "inspiration," or, as we say, "intuition."

Now, the word "intuition" means "seeing," and it will be found that persons of genius do *see* in their mind's eye—see unwritten rows of numbers, hidden pieces on a chess board, the positions of absent armies, the unknown consequences of events, the effects of natural forces as of steam in a kettle, with a clearness unfamiliar to the general body of mankind.

This curious gift of mental, or inner, vision is certainly more common in children than in grown-up people. The creations of their own fancies are more vividly present to little boys and girls than to grown-up people. So far, almost all children are children of genius, and a man of genius is often what he is because he has retained this gift of childhood.

How often children, not destined to be famous, amaze us by wisdom beyond their years! "Out of the mouths of babes" comes a word which the child's own experience, we think, could never have taught him. Has he inherited this genius, as birds inherit, without knowing it, the art of nest-building? Or is it that his eyes are not yet blinded by the dust and smoke of the world?

Next to genius for arithmetic, genius for music is probably the most developed and most surprising in childhood. "He lisps in numbers," like Pope, because there really is a connection between numbers and music.

If we turn to poetry, it becomes far more difficult to recognize early genius. Thousands of boys rhyme from a very early age, thousands of boys who will never be poets. Now the rhymes of the boys who were destined to be poets have usually been no better than the rhymes of boys who were destined to fall back on prose.

The young Mozart was, from the age of four, undeniably a born musician. The young Millais, or Leonardo, or Landseer, or West, was, from early boyhood, undeniably a born painter. But the boyish poems of Scott, Keats, Byron, Shelley, Coleridge, and Tennyson were not a whit better, and were often a good deal worse, than those of boys who were not to be poets at all.

As most children have many of the imaginative qualities of genius, the gift of vivid dreams, and as most children who are to be men of genius display little *special* power—except in music, arithmetic, and drawing—it is not an easy thing for parents to know whether they have a genius in the family or not !

As far as I have studied the childhood of genius, it commonly shows itself less in performance than in *character*, and, alas, not agreeably ! The future genius is often violent, ferocious, fond of solitude, disagreeable in society.

The great Du Guesclin, the scourge of the English invaders of France, was a most odious boy. His parents had to make him dine at a table apart. He was rude, furious, a bully ; he beat every boy he could lay hands on ; he ran away from home ; he led companies of peasant children against other companies ; he was the terror of the neighborhood, and the ugliest page, as he became “the ugliest knight in France.” This was the boyhood of a great military genius ; the boyhood it was of a little savage.

Scott’s childhood was noisy. He yelled old poems at the top of his voice. He loved the lonely hills. He read forever, when he was not wandering alone, and he remembered everything that he read. He was a dreamer, a teller of romances to himself. He delighted in fighting, as did Keats. He studied everything except his books. His enthusiasm for poetry made a lady recognize him for a genius at the age of six, but his father thought he would end as a strolling fiddler.

Napoleon, again, was sullen, lonely, a dreamer, and always “spoiling for a fight,” like Du Guesclin.

Unluckily, sullen, dreamy, pugnacious boys are not at all uncommon. They do not become Scotts (not that *he* was sullen), nor Du Guesclins, nor Napoleons, nor Byrons—for Byron, too, was a passionate, lonely, morbid kind of boy, with terrible fits of temper. His early poems were trash.

Shelley’s early poems were trash ; Scott’s were such as almost

any cleverish schoolboy can write, and there is no promise at all in the Tennysons' "Poems by Two Brothers."

Shelley, indeed, was rather "mad" at school, where he cursed his father and the King, and wrote the silliest of all schoolboy novels. He, also, was dreamy and solitary, but by no manner of means fond of fighting.

In all these cases eccentricity was marked, but whether eccentricity in boyhood can be taken as promise of character and genius is another question. At school in Scotland, a few boys, like "Mad Shelley," were called "dafty." None of them has amazed the world by displaying genius! The great men named were all "dafties" in boyhood, but all "dafties" do not become great men.

Coleridge was a "dafty." "I took no pleasure in boyish sports, but read incessantly." The other boys drove him from among them. He was always a dreamer, and saw so many ghosts that he did not believe in them. "Before I was eight years old I was a *character*," he says—and not an agreeable character! He was vain, lazy, he dreamed, and he despised everybody. He ran away from home, and stayed out all night in the rain. His son, Hartley, was the same child over again, and a metaphysical philosopher from his cradle.

In most of these cases, in addition to mooning, solitary ways, and moody tempers, there was conspicuous *intellect* in the young genius. He could read early and, as it were, untaught, and he did read a great deal. Scott, Byron, Keats, were also athletes and very fond of boxing, of sport, and of games, Byron bowling at cricket for Harrow. *These* geniuses were not such "dafties" as their rivals.

For my part, genius or no genius, I do hate a boy who "shuns boyish sports," as you so often read in biographies. But, on a general survey of genius in childhood, I think that we ought to try to put up with it, and not bully it at school, "at least as far as we are able."

If the genius is a born artist, he is likely to be popular for drawing dogs, horses, and the schoolmaster. If he is going to be a poet—why one rather pities him, in his schooldays. A Scott, a Keats, may make himself respected at school, by a genial readiness to fight all challengers, to take part in every dangerous diversion. A Cowper, or a Shelley, should probably not be sent to

school at all, and genius rarely passes through the University without what Coleridge calls "a row."

These troubles and sorrows come, because, whatever else genius may be, it is certainly a thing apart, self-centred, and ill to govern. A genius "varies from the kindly race of men," hence the tendency, even in childhood, to a love of solitary places, that passion so marked in Wordsworth from his boyhood.

Even in childhood, also, it is a mistake to try to drive genius, a mistake which naturally flows from Dr. Johnson's theory, that the spiritual force can be turned into any chosen direction. Following the Doctor, parents will endeavor to make a boy with a genius for literature take to law or to civil engineering. The effort was made with Mr. R. L. Stevenson, and, of course, failed.

Mr. Stevenson was the only genius whom I ever knew moderately well; in boyhood I did not know him. But he has described, in his own case, the day and night dreams, the love of lonely wanderings, the ungovernableness, the dislike of boyish sports, and the other symptoms of genius in the bud. The *character* was there; the boyish *performances* were not remarkable. You cannot recognize literary genius, in boyhood, "by results." Musical, mathematical, mechanical, and artistic excellence are, for some reason, much more easily recognized, almost from the first.

Perhaps these remarks may console parents of lonely, dreamy, moody, ungovernable sons. Perhaps they may modify the contempt of schoolboys for "dafties." Don't bully such lads; don't thwart them needlessly. They may be children of promise, though the odds, unluckily, are against any future performance.

At all events, do not drive them too hard into uncongenial industries. An instinct wiser than experience may be guiding them into the way appointed. They must and will go their own way. Still, had I a son, who displayed, like Mr. D. D. Home, a genius for being a medium, I certainly should thwart him to the full extent of "the resources of civilization."

ANDREW LANG.